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EGYPT

CASE STUDY

Religious Leaders Respond to HIV/AIDS

Community's respect for clergy tapped to raise awareness on disease



Muslim and Christian religious leaders discussed ways to appeal to their respective communities on HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention at a training.

"I've learned to view the problem of HIV/AIDS from a new perspective and look forward to spreading the vital information that people need to know to protect themselves from the disease," said one religious leader at a workshop on HIV/AIDS.

Challenge

In the Middle East and North Africa region, religious leaders are essential actors in a successful response to HIV/AIDS as they have legitimacy and a durable presence in local communities. They are uniquely positioned to increase awareness of routes of transmission, reduce the stigma and discrimination attached to HIV/AIDS and reinforce the religious values found in both regionally dominant religions, Islam and Christianity. While conservative social norms have kept the rates of HIV/AIDS infection down, they may also be responsible for the lack of prevention because taboos prevent frank discussion of prevention methods and stand in the way of testing and medical treatment.

Initiative

With USAID support, a regional religious leaders colloquium in Cairo kicked off an initiative to enlist religious leaders in the response to HIV/AIDS. Following the regional meeting, several workshops were conducted for Egyptian religious leaders, who were asked to develop a work plan of proposed activities that would include religious meetings, awareness raising sessions in schools, universities and places of worship, and incorporating HIV/AIDS messages in public addresses to convey knowledge to the general public. These leaders went on to give speeches and conduct seminars and meetings for the general public, targeting youth, women, adults and the elderly.

Results

The religious leaders involved in the capacity-building activities reacted positively, becoming committed and devoted to aiding in the effective response to HIV/AIDS. The religion-specific awareness kits, by drawing on inherent religious concepts, gave religious leaders the tools they need to make awareness messages familiar and acceptable. Once they gained knowledge about the disease and had their misconceptions clarified, the audiences to whom these leaders spoke were willing to share and interact as well as be enthusiastic about the role they could play in fighting the disease.